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REAGAN ENVISIONS KOREA TROOP CUT

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Before Meeting Roh, He Says
Reduction Is a Possibility
Should Tensions Wane

By ROBERT PEAR

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Oct. 20 — President Reagan said today that there was a possibility that the United States would reduce its military forces in South Korea if, at some future date, they were "no longer needed" because of a reduction in tensions in the region.

Administration officials said no withdrawal of American troops was imminent. But Mr. Reagan's extemporaneous comment in the Rose Garden of the White House seemed to go further than previous statements by Administration officials.

Mr. Reagan made the comment before he met at the White House with President Roh Tae Woo of South Korea.

On Tuesday a senior American official, speaking to reporters at the White House, was asked whether the Administration was considering a gradual reduction in the number of American troops in South Korea. "Absolutely no, nothing of that sort is under discussion," the official said. A Pentagon spokesman said today that there were 44,000 American troops in South Korea.

As he prepared to meet with Mr. Roh, President Reagan was asked by a reporter if he could "envision a time in the near future when the U.S. would be reducing its military presence" in South Korea. He replied: "That is a possibility. It would not be one of us just withdrawing. It would be a case of — no longer needed."

Mr. Reagan did not specify when that might occur. "I can just say, seeing how in other areas of the world, tensions have been lessened, if there's a possibility of that, why, then yes, that should happen," Mr. Reagan said.

Asked if such changes seemed more likely now than when he took office, Mr. Reagan said, "There have been a great many changes over these eight years, and I think it's possible to see some things that we couldn't foresee then."

Mr. Reagan's national security adviser, Lieut. Gen. Colin L. Powell, who was standing off to the side, looked surprised when Mr. Reagan talked about the possibility of reducing the number of troops in South Korea.

Two hours later Gaston J. Sigur, the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said the two Presidents had not discussed the reduction of American forces.

"There is no intention of any kind of change in our policy of maintaining our forces, our ground forces, in Korea," Mr. Sigur said. "We would have to see a very definite shift in the North, which we certainly do not see at this time."